

TEACHING IS POLITICAL: INTRODUCTION

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Teaching is political. Paul Thomas, Professor of Education, Furman University wrote on his blog (15 February 2017), “Everything involving humans is necessarily political, even and especially teaching and learning.” Thomas goes on, “Therefore, no teacher at any level can truly be apolitical, objective. Taking a neutral or objective pose is a political choice, and an endorsement of the status quo.” Here Thomas is echoing Paulo Freire’s well-known proposition, “Washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral” (1984, p. 524). In this New Zealand election year (2017), we invited John O’Neill, Martin Thrupp and Liz Gordon to speak to teachers and school leaders about their particular current educational concerns. It was the intention to provide food for thought for teachers/school leaders and to encourage dialogue around the dinner party table, BBQ or other social gathering where the election might be discussed.

Although many of us are uncomfortable ‘talking politics’, the fact remains that teaching is political. Public expectations of teachers and school leaders are high. Government education budgets and policy agendas impact on the conditions and nature of our work. The ideological views of elected representatives and their parties permeates policy. Some policies prompt broad based professional and public push back, other policies are more subtle in their impact. O’Neill outlines ‘privatisation by stealth’ and highlights that adjustments in public policy have changed our education system from a universal and free state system to one that is ‘partially subsidised’. The notion of externalisation is raised, with education partners being portrayed by government as ‘heroes’ carrying the load to counteract ‘education inequalities’. Many of the key players do have a vested interest in promulgating their brand of solution.

Whether the belief is ‘pull yourself up by your own bootstraps’ or ‘it takes a village to raise a child’, our worldviews, and those of whom we elect, effect the enactment of education. Ten years ago, National Standards was a rallying cry of the National Party. It passed into law in December 2008, amid controversy. In his article, Thrupp evaluates whether the policy has been a success. He highlights the inequalities of enactment, and changing subjectivities due to necessity and ponders the ‘possibilities and problems for practice’. He reminds us that it is still a work in progress, and cautions about using the data to foster ‘social investment’. He leaves us with a question—where should our energies lie?

Gordon’s piece reminds us that as teachers, we are instruments of democracy. She speaks of past challenges where the status of teachers was eroded and the framework of teaching moved towards a free-market model. She questions whether these changes have actually afforded New Zealand students a better education. She warns of a new challenge—isolationism and intolerance—drawing our gaze to the changing global political environment, giving examples of Brexit and the Trump Presidency. The vulnerability of New Zealand to this type of dogma, she suggests, is foreshadowed in social inequality, racially divided schools, and anti-immigrant sentiment. She proposes that we change the discourse and BLESS our students.

What we are advocating for here is not partisan politics in education but participation in political aspects of our society.

Engage in discussion

- Are current trends really inevitable or are there alternatives?
- What are our beliefs about the ties between society, education, and economy?
- Are schools about learning or ‘preparation for earning’?
- In a nation that celebrates elite sports persons where do children develop foundational skills of team membership, cooperation and collaboration?

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- What is the place for literature and arts in New Zealand?

Advocate for

- policies of inclusion, equity, and sustainability across education, health, justice and environmental issues;
- dialogue that explores possibilities rather than reduces issues to ‘my side’ and ‘your side’; this side and the ‘other’ side;
- setting the trajectory of our future in New Zealand towards the kind of society you wish to live in;
- voting.

In classrooms around the country, at a number of levels, children will be studying New Zealand’s electoral process, how our government works and, we assume, concepts of citizenship and democracy. There are now many resources available to answer such questions, and studies available on student views on, and learning about the political process to support teachers in working with children.

Contemporary international experience (United States of America, France, the United Kingdom) reinforces the significance of the right to vote and the importance of informed choice. The results of these elections remind us that it does matter; all votes counts. Our government is an indication of our national identity, how we view our land and our history, who we aspire to be and how we seek to interact with each other and with the other.

Therefore, whether it is around our dinner tables or in our classrooms, as we experience the New Zealand’s electoral process, we consider how our government works, the impact policy has on education, and the privileges and constraints of citizenship and democracy. The old adage—‘be careful what you wish for’ comes to mind.

Other articles in this issue also speak to key themes for this journal: Consideration of what it means to be a teacher, teacher development and curriculum development.

In Gosgriff’s piece, the benefits of taking outdoor experience classes with students for teachers’ wellbeing is explored. The project this article is based on has already spoken in other publications on the advantages for students. Gosgriff wanted to highlight the ‘support’ that interacting with the natural world can provide for teachers too.

Whyte and Deane provide us with an example of a teacher making decisions about the ‘how’ and the ‘whats’ of curriculum and assessment pedagogy. A link to a YouTube clip is provided to give a visual reference for the story. Recognising that convergent influences in summative judgements of student achievement and standards are providing the drive for greater similarities in students’ experience of teaching and learning, and for teacher control of timetables and content, these authors using the NZC as support, advocate for divergent practices of student exploration, curiosity and questioning. A jigsaw piece of this issue being teacher agency in curriculum practice.

Lemon and Edwards tell a story of how one young teacher successfully handled making a culturally responsive connection with her secondary class. The unpacking of this narrative using Bell (2011) provides some support for new teachers and teachers with new challenging classes. Theory informs practice and can help us make meaning from experience. The stories of others can help sustain our own resilience.

The collection by Hunter et al., draws attention to teacher agency and critical inquiry of curriculum policy. As a collection it ticks many boxes for Teachers and Curriculum journal. Developed originally as Working Paper assignments in a Masters of Teaching programme, these five manuscripts, with Pip’s introduction to set the scene, present new teacher views on the New Zealand Curriculum document. Readers can consider the depth of these students’ critical inquiry and personal meaning making after only three months of teacher education and also (re)consider what it means to be a teacher under current policy.

It is interesting to speculate on the degree of match and mismatch between teacher and student ideas/expectations about the use of digital technologies (DTs) for teaching and learning. How do we know whose ideas to pursue? Hawera, Wright and Sharma explore how lecturers *best* support student

teachers use of digital technologies in enhancing their teaching of mathematics. The small research study presented here is part of a larger project looking at ITE students' perceptions about the mathematical content of particular Digital Learning Objects (DLOs) and how these might be used with learners in the classroom. It seems that the students in this study had more conservative views than their lecturers.

Similarly, Sanchal & Sharma identify benefits for students in the exploration of mathematical thinking in a sports context. A quantitative approach was used to gain an indication of student attitudes to mathematics before and after study using a sports context relevant to the class, in this case Ki-O-Rahi. They found increases in reported confidence, awareness and engagement with maths lessons.

We also have an interview with Graham Price. Graham is retiring from the arts team at the University of Waikato in 2017. His questions for a teacher readership include "What is the best way to support kids art learning in a school setting? Are there some basic foundational ways of behaving in a way that actually supports kids art making? How do you go about developing your own knowledge professionally?" Graham shares his understandings about art that go some way to answer these questions along with many ideas for sustaining and satisfying the desire for art-making.

This issue concludes with a book review by Carrie Swanson. The book is *A beginners guide to Mantle of the Expert: A transformative approach to education* by Tim Taylor (2016). This is a book for classroom teachers who are interested in using dramatic inquiry pedagogies to enhance learning in their classes and those who want to learn more about the approach.

The articles in this issue are for teachers, about teachers, about becoming a teacher, and about teaching. Each one is also about wellbeing, critical thinking, developing knowledge and skills, and working together. They are shaped within our current political environment but joined together by a desire to enhance education and learning.

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